
Christmas Eve

A SHORT STORY

by

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

THE Christmas-eve supper!* Oh! no, I shall never go in for that again!" Stout Henri Templier said that in a furious voice, as if some one had proposed some crime to him, while the others laughed and said:

"What are you flying into a rage about?"

"Because a Christmas-eve supper played me the dirtiest trick in the world, and ever since I have felt an insurmountable horror for that night of imbecile gaiety."

"Tell us about it."

"You want to know what it was? Very well then, just listen.

"You remember how cold it was two years ago at Christmas; cold enough to kill poor people in the streets. The Seine was covered with ice; the pavements froze one's feet through the soles of one's boots, and the whole world seemed to be at the point of congealing.

"I had a big piece of work on, and refused every invitation to supper, as I preferred to spend the night at my writing table. I dined alone and then began to work. But about ten o'clock

I grew restless at the thought of the gay and busy life all over Paris, at the noise in the streets which reached me in spite of everything, at my neighbors' preparations for supper, which I heard through the walls. I hardly knew any longer what I was doing; I wrote nonsense, and at last I came to the conclusion that I had better give up all hope of producing any good work that night.

"I walked up and down my room; I sat down and got up again. I was certainly under the mysterious influence of the enjoyment outside, and I resigned myself to it. So I rang for my servant, and said to her:

"'Angela, go and get a good supper for two; some oysters, a cold partridge, some crayfish, ham, and some cakes. Put out two bottles of champagne, lay the cloth and go to bed.'

"She obeyed in some surprise, and when all was ready, I put on my great-coat and went out. The great question remained: 'Whom was I going to bring in to supper?' My female friends had

*A great institution in France, and especially in Paris, at which black puddings are an indispensable dish.

all been invited elsewhere, and if I had wished to have one, I ought to have seen about it beforehand. So I thought that I would do a good action at the same time, and said to myself:

"Paris is full of poor and pretty girls who will have nothing on the table to-night, and who are on the lookout for some generous fellow. I will act the part of Providence to one of them this evening; and I will find one if I have to go to every pleasure resort and I will hunt till I find one to my choice. So I started off on my search.

"I certainly found many poor girls who were on the lookout for some adventure, but they were ugly enough to give a man a fit of indigestion, or thin enough to freeze in their tracks if they stopped, and you all know that I have a weakness for stout women. The more flesh they have, the better I like them, and a female colossus would be my ideal.

"Suddenly, opposite the 'Théâtre des Variétés,' I saw a figure to my liking. I trembled with pleasure, and said:

"'By jove! What a fine girl!'

"It only remained for me to see her face, for a woman's face is the dessert.

"I hastened on, overtook her, and turned round suddenly under a gas lamp. She was charming, quite young, dark, with large, black eyes, and I immediately made my proposition which she accepted without any hesitation, and a quarter of an hour later we were sitting at supper in my lodgings. 'Oh! how comfortable it is here,' she said as she came in, and looked about her with evident satisfaction at having found a supper and a bed on that bitter night.

She was superb; so beautiful that she astonished me, and so stout that she fairly captivated me.

"She took off her cloak and hat, sat down and began to eat; but she seemed in low spirits, and sometimes her pale face twitched as if she were suffering from hidden sorrow.

"'Have you anything troubling you?' I asked her.

"'Bah! Don't let us think of troubles!'

"And she began to drink. She emptied her champagne glass at a draught, filled it again, and emptied it again, without stopping, and soon a little color came into her cheeks and she began to laugh.

"I adored her already, kissed her continually, and discovered that she was neither stupid, nor common, nor coarse as ordinary street-walkers are. I asked her for some details about her life, but she replied:

"'My little fellow, that is no business of yours!' Alas! an hour later!

"At last it was time to retire, and while I was clearing the table, which had been laid in front of the fire, she undressed herself quickly, and got in. My neighbors were making a terrible din, singing and laughing like lunatics, and so I said to myself:

"'I was quite right to go out and bring in this girl; I should never have been able to do any work.'

"At this moment, however, a deep groan made me look around, and I said:

"'What is the matter with you, my dear?'

"She did not reply, but continued to utter painful sighs, as if she were suffering horribly, and I continued:

"Do you feel ill?" And suddenly she uttered a cry, a heartrending cry, and I rushed up to the bed, with a candle in my hand.

"Her face was distorted with pain, and she was wringing her hands, panting and uttering long, deep groans, which sounded like a rattle in the throat, and were painful to hear. I asked her in consternation:

"What is the matter with you? Do tell me what is the matter."

"Oh! the pain! the pain!" she said. I pulled up the bedclothes, and I saw, my friends, that she was in labor.

"Then I lost my head, and ran and knocked at the wall with my fists, shouting: 'Help! help!'

"My door was opened almost immediately, and a crowd of people came in, men in evening clothes, women in full dress, harlequins, Turks, musketeers, and the inroad startled me so, that I could not explain myself, while they who had thought that some accident had happened or that a crime had been committed, could not understand what was the matter. At last, however, I managed to say:

"This—this—woman—is being confined."

"Then they looked at her, and gave their opinion. A frair, especially, declared that he knew all about it, and wished to assist nature, but as they were all as drunk as pigs I was afraid that they would kill her. So I rushed downstairs without my hat, to fetch an old doctor, who lived in the next street. When I came back with him, the whole house was up; the gas on the stairs had been relighted, the lodgers from every floor were in my

room, while four boatmen were finishing my champagne and cray-fish.

"As soon as they saw me they raised a loud shout. A milkmaid presented me with a horrible little wrinkled specimen of humanity, that was mewing like a cat, and said to me:

"It is a girl."

"The doctor examined the woman, declared that she was in a dangerous state, as the event had occurred immediately after supper, and took his leave, saying he would immediately send a sick nurse and a wet nurse. An hour later, the two women came, bringing all that was requisite with them.

"I spent the night in my armchair, too distracted to be able to think of the consequences, and almost as soon as it was light the doctor came again. He found his patient very ill, and said to me:

"Your wife, Monsieur—"

"She is not my wife," I interrupted him.

"Very well then, your mistress; it does not matter to me."

"He told me what must be done for her, what her diet must be, and then wrote a prescription.

"What was I to do? Could I send the poor creature to the hospital? I should have been looked upon as a brute in the house and in all the neighborhood. So I kept her in my rooms, and she had my bed for six weeks.

"I sent the child to some peasants at Poissy to be taken care of, and she still costs me fifty francs* a month, for as I had paid at first, I shall be

*\$10.

obliged to go on paying as long as I live. Later on, she will believe that I am her father. But to crown my misfortunes, when the girl had recovered, I found that she was in love with me, madly in love with me, the baggage!"

"Well?"

"Well, she had grown as thin as a

homeless cat, and I turned the skeleton out of doors. But she watches for me in the streets, hides herself, so that she may see me pass, stops me in the evening when I go out, in order to kiss my hand, and, in fact, worries me enough to drive me mad. That is why I never keep Christmas eve now."

